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Bekaa Valley Becomes New Golden Triangle

The military focus in the Middle East has shifted from Beirut to the Bekaa Valley in eastern Lebanon, where Syria and Israel are building up their forces. At stake is one of the Middle East's most fertile areas. But the most important crop isn't melons or wheat; it's hashish.

Intelligence sources in Israel, Lebanon and Washington agree that hashish production has increased since 1976, when the Syrians occupied the Bekaa Valley as a United Nations' peace-keeping force. Some sources suggest that hashish is one reason Syria wants to stay there.

A classified "narcotics intelligence estimate," prepared with the help of the CIA and shown to my associate Dale Van Atta, estimates that the valley's annual production of hashish was 230 to 260 tons, almost double what it was before the Syrian occupation. Nearly 75 percent of the crop has been going to Egypt each year, the report notes. "Generally, only one crop is grown per year," the narcotics report explains. "It is . . . harvested from mid-August to mid-September, before the advent of the rainy season."

In other words, the Lebanese farmers are harvesting their crop right now; at least they're trying to. The intelligence experts say this year's hashish crop is not nearly as big as usual, because of the Israeli invasion. But no one can guess the exact size of the crop because, as one report notes, "the flow of narcotics intelligence from Lebanon has been seriously curtailed because of the turmoil there."

Anywhere from 9,000 to 13,000 acres of the Bekaa Valley are devoted to cultivation of cannabis, the plant that produces marijuana and hashish. Because of the valley's lushness, an acre yields a 3,080-pound crop. This can be transformed into more than a ton of marijuana, or 35 to 60 pounds of hashish.

When the Syrians moved in, "some of the land abandoned by Christian villagers [was] confiscated by Moslem farmers and put into cannabis cultivation," the narcotics estimate reports. It adds that "the livelihood of two-thirds of the valley's population" depended directly on hashish cultivation under the Syrians. Before the Israeli invasion, the Bekaa Valley was controlled "by approximately 20 family organizations," each of which had its own "well-armed, paramilitary force whose arsenals reportedly contain automatic weapons and, in some cases, tanks," the report states.

Lebanese authorities have gener-

ally winked at the lucrative, illicit traffic. It is an irony that the hashish trade has been one of the principal areas of close cooperation between Moslems and Christians.

"Traditionally, Christians have controlled most of the business and financial arrangements of the hashish trade, [including control of] two of the major hashish export cities in the north," says a classified report. "Moslems, on the other hand, have been the hashish cultivators."

Clearly, this unholy alliance is still operational, waiting only for the Syrians and Israelis to settle their differences and let the hashish traffic get back to normal.

Post-Election Purge: After the Nov. 2 elections, President Reagan is expected to authorize a major purge of Cabinet members and White House aides. The ax will probably fall between Thanksgiving and Christmas, when most of Washington has its mind on turkeys, sugarplums and lame ducks.

Administration insiders say those headed for the block include Labor Secretary Raymond J. Donovan, Interior Secretary James G. Watt, Education Secretary Terrel H. Bell and Housing and Urban Development Secretary Samuel R. Pierce Jr. In the White House, Office of Management and Budget Director David A. Stockman, communications assistant David R. Gergen and counsel Fred F. Fielding are reported on the hit list.